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SUBJECT: PM Barzani Pledges Strong Support for Cultural Heritage Institute

(U) This is a Regional Reconstruction Team (RRT) Erbil reporting cable.

Summary

1. (U) During a 2/19 meeting at his residence, Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister Barzani told a visiting State Department delegation that he fully supports the establishment of a national cultural heritage preservation training institute in Erbil. The PM said the KRG would cost-share by providing the institute with rent-free use of the former Erbil public library building, which the KRG would also renovate to the required U.S. standards. The PM emphasized that the establishment of such an institute was not simply good for the KRG but for all of Iraq. Speaking more broadly about Iraq's relations with America, the PM observed that "this kind of cooperation" -- specifically cited in the Strategic Framework Agreement -- would play an increasingly important role, particularly as the security situation in Iraq improved and the SOFA's importance waned. Acknowledging that U.S. funding for the project covered two years, the PM said he would propose to Baghdad that the KRG and the federal government form a "joint venture" to make the institute permanent. In a follow-on meeting with Erbil Governor Nawzad Hadi, the governor confirmed that the library could be used by the institute and agreed to renovate the building to U.S. specs. Hadi also made an important cost-saving decision: he said he would instruct the Asayeesh, the Kurdistan Region's security service, to permit the institute to create separate dormitories in the institute building for men and women and allow people from any Iraqi province (read: Arabs) to live there -- a far less costly alternative to staying in local hotels. End summary.

Context: ICHP Delegation Visits Erbil

2. (U) A delegation led by the State Department's Special Coordinator for Iraq Cultural Heritage, Dr. John Russell, visited the Kurdistan Region February 16-20 for a series of discussions with KRG officials about establishing an Iraqi Cultural Heritage Project (ICHP) conservation and historic preservation institute in Erbil. In addition to Russell, the delegation included:

- Embassy Baghdad Cultural Heritage Officer Diane Siebrandt;
- U.S. National Park Service Chief Historical Architect Randy Biallas;
- Winterthur Museum Director of Preservation and Department consultant Lois Price;
- IRD ICHP Project Director Gordon Davis;
- IRD ICHP Erbil Institute Project Coordinator Brian Lione;
- Iraqi State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH) Director General for Engineering and Restorations Faiza Hussain; and,
- SBAH Chief Engineer Salah Al-Mufti.

Surprise: PM Barzani Meets Delegation at His Residence...

3. (U) After initially being told that KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani would be unable to see the delegation because of a visit to Erbil by the German Foreign Minister, the PM changed his mind and

called the group to his official residence on 2/19 for an early-morning meeting. Accompanied by KRG Foreign Relations Department Chief Falah Mustafa Bakir, the PM emphasized that the project had his "full support." Acknowledging the size of the USG contribution to the project and noting his "strong personal interest" in establishing the institute in Erbil, the PM said the KRG would provide significant cost-sharing by renovating the former Erbil public library building to meet the required U.S. standards. "I will call the Erbil governor and tell him to do it. Just tell the governor exactly what you need," Barzani emphasized.

...Charms Baghdad Officials...

14. (U) The Prime Minister emphasized that one aspect of the project he "loved" was the fact that it would train officials from throughout Iraq and not just the Kurdistan Region. Pausing to speak in Arabic to the SBAH officials and then translate into English for the rest of the delegation, Barzani said he would instruct "everybody" in the KRG to work closely with the SBAH in facilitating travel to Erbil by officials from other parts of Iraq. "We want people from Baghdad to come here," Barzani emphasized, adding that the establishment of such an institute was not simply good for the KRG "but for all of Iraq!"

...Hails the Strategic Framework Agreement...

15. (U) Obviously well-briefed by his staff, Barzani quizzed the delegation on the content and length of the courses that would be taught at the institute. Referring to Russell's expertise and long involvement in preserving and protecting Iraqi cultural heritage, including in Duhok's Amedi district, the PM said it was "absolutely critical" for foreign experts to come and teach at the institute. "We have the money to build things, but what we need is capacity building for our people," he said. The PM agreed with Russell's observation that well-trained Iraqi officials could help turn major cultural heritage sites into revenue-generating tourism destinations. Speaking more broadly about Iraq's relations with the United States, the PM observed that "this kind of cooperation" -- specifically cited in the Strategic Framework Agreement -- would play an increasingly important role in bilateral relations, particularly as the security situation in Iraq continued to stabilize and the SOFA's importance waned.

...and Pledges Cooperation with Baghdad to Keep It Going

16. (U) Acknowledging that U.S. funding for the project was for two years only and that Iraqis would have to keep the institute running, the Prime Minister said he would propose to Baghdad that the KRG and the federal government form a "joint venture" to keep the institute operating. For its part, Barzani said, KRG support would not just be "for two years, but for the long haul." The PM seconded the view of SBAH DG Faiza Hussain, who said that since each province in Iraq would benefit from the institute, each province should contribute a fixed amount of money annually to help cover the institute's costs.

Follow-On Meeting with Erbil Governor: "The PM Just Called"

17. (U) In a follow-on meeting with Erbil Governor Nawzad Hadi, the governor told the delegation that he had just been briefed by the Prime Minister and his staff. Hadi said the former Erbil public library could be used as the ICHP institute and agreed to renovate the facility to meet the required standards. "We promise to do everything that needs to be done," he said, noting that his chief engineer, Vian Rasheed, would be the point of contact in his office. Acknowledging Russell's point that every State Department dollar spent on renovating the facility would be one less dollar for capacity building, Hadi stressed that he recognized how important the institute would be not only for Erbil and the Kurdistan Region, but for the entire country. The governor put in a plea for training as many people as possible from Erbil, as the province had "a lot of

cultural heritage sites" and working-level cultural heritage officials "needed capacity-building."

¶8. (U) The governor also made an important decision about security that will save the project a lot of money. Speaking in Arabic to the SBAH officials, Hadi emphasized that "people from Baghdad and other parts of Iraq" (read: Arabs) would not face difficulties in traveling to and living in the Kurdistan Region. Moreover, Hadi said he would instruct the Erbil Asayeesh, the Kurdistan Region security service, to permit the institute to create separate dormitories in the institute building for men and women and allow people from any Iraqi province to live there -- a far less costly alternative to staying in local hotels.

Comment: Hard to Top

¶9. (U) As meetings with KRG officials go, the upbeat, positive sessions with the Prime Minister and governor would be hard to top. Barzani and Hadi expressed strong support for the project and the delegation believes the old Erbil library building would be an excellent location for the institute. The State Department's contractor for the project, IRD, will be following up with the PM's office and the governor's office to confirm, in writing, the KRG's willingness to cost-share.
Qwillingness to cost-share.

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